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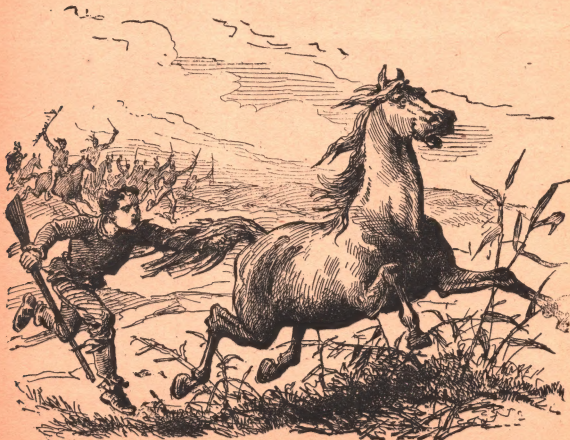
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CALIFORNIA JOE, THE MYSTERIOUS PLAINSMAN.

The strange adventures of an Unknown Man, whose real identity,
like that of the "Man of the Iron Mask" is still unsolved.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "ADVENTURES OF BUFFALO BILL," "WILD BILL," "TEXAS JACK," "BRUN ADAMS," ETC., ETC.



"YELL AWAY, YOU RED DEVILS! BUT HERE WE GO AND NO ONE TO HEAD US OFF!"

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BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.
AUTHOR OF LIFE OF "BUFFALO BILL," "WILD BILL," "PEAK JACK," "WHITE HEAVEN," "ARCONO HILLY," "BUCKENIN SAM," "KIDIE NIGHT HAWK GEORGE," "KIDIE BURGERS, THE HOT CHIEF," "HEBRANEA CLEARLEY," "BRITIN ADAMS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE FOREST PHANTOM.

"Who was California Joe?"
Kind reader, that question I cannot answer any more than can I the queries:
"Who was the Man of the Iron Mask?"
"Who wrote the 'Junius Letters'?"

But from the time he emerged upon the eventful career of a border boy, when he was in his seventeenth year, I can write of him, and many a thrilling tale of his adventures can be told.

But go beyond that night when he first appeared to a wagon-train of emigrants, and became their guide, and all a mystery, as though a veil had been drawn between him and the years that had gone before, for of himself this strange man could never speak.

One night—nearly half a century ago—a train, westward bound, was encamped just where the prairie met the woodland and hills.

It consisted of a score of white-tiled wagons, drawn by oxen, half as many stoutly-built caymalls, to which were hitched servicable horses, and the stock of the emigrants, comprising horses, cattle, sheep and dogs.

Perhaps half a hundred souls were in the train, half of them being hardy, fearless men, and the remainder their wives and children, seeking homes in the better lands.

When the camp had been pitched for the night, an hour before sunset—for the train traveled slowly, retarded as it was with their stock—a few of the younger men took their rifles for a stroll through the woodland and hills, hoping to knock over a few wild turkeys and squirrels for the evening meal.

They were quite successful, and lured on by the sport, they penetrated the hills for a couple of miles, and only thought of returning when the evening shadows warned them that night was at hand.

"Heaven above! Look there!"
The cry came from the lips of one of the party, and all were thrilled, with the sudden exclamation, which told of something more worthy of attention than a wild turkey or even a bear.

All glanced in the direction in which the one who had made some startling discovery was gazing, and every eye became riveted at once in a manner that proved the thrilling cry of their comrades had not been uttered for naught.

There, some hundred paces distant, from where they stood, was what appeared to be a horse and rider.

The animal was snow-white, and stood as motionless as though carved from marble.

The rider was dressed in deep black from boots to hat, and sat silent and still.

Even in the gathering gloom his face, seemingly very pale, was visible, and it was beardless.

Across his lap lay a rifle, also seemingly painted black, and a belt of arms of the same somber hue was about his waist.

The horse was saddle and bridleless, and stood with head erect gazing upon the party.

This much all of the young emigrants saw. But who was this strange being and his ghost-like horse?

Oh, ye remembered to have heard their guide tell a story how a phantom horse and rider had been seen by old hunters and trappers in

that forest of late months, and none knew aught of him.

All then recalled the story, and felt that they beheld the same mysterious being.

The guide had died a few days before, and been buried by the roadside, and the train was continuing its way upon the indistinct memory of one of the wagons who had before been upon the trail, rather than delay for weeks until another plainsman could be found to lead them.

They therefore could not ask the guide, upon their return to camp, to describe again the Phantom of the Forest, which he and others had seen; but that this must be the horse and rider that had won such fame, there could be no doubt in the minds of the young emigrants.

The guide had said, they remembered, that he allowed no one to approach near him, and that they would now solve the truth of.

After a moment of hesitation, passed in low, earnest conversation, they decided to halt the seeming Phantom.

"Ho, stranger!" called out one of the number.

But no reply came, and neither horse or rider moved.

"Stranger, who are you?"

Again was the call unanswered.

"Ho, stranger, we are lost; our train is on the precipice under the bank cliff, and we must thank you to show us back to camp."

One of the arms of the mysterious horseman was raised and beckoned to them, as though to follow; and the white horse turned and walked slowly away, though no reply came from the rider.

"Come, boys, let us follow him," cried one, and taking up their guns they did.

Arriving at the spot where they had just beheld the seeming Phantom standing, they halted suddenly.

No wonder, for they stood in the midst of a dozen graves.

The graves had not yet covered them, which proved they had not long held their occupants, and no head-bones marked them.

But a well-worn path led from the spot sacred to the dead up the hillside.

But this path was not the one the mysterious horseman had taken, as he had turned short off down the hillside.

As he saw the party of emigrants halt among the graves, he again beckoned them on, and once more they followed him, silent and wondering.

Slightly the shadows deepened around them, and night came on; but as though to still allow them to keep him in sight, the silent horseman dropped back until the white steed could be seen winding his way through the timber.

At last he halted, and allowed them to approach almost up to him, and then the white horse bounded away and disappeared in the gloom.

They called to him, yet no answer came back, and soon the fall of the hoof-strokes was no longer heard.

Reaching the spot where they had last seen him, a cry broke from the lips of all, for there, right below them, they beheld the cheerful glances of their camp-fires.

He had guided them truly, and five minutes after they were in camp, telling over and over again the strange story of the Forest Phantom.

CHAPTER II.

THE UNKNOWN GUIDE.

WHEN the dawn broke upon the camp, the emigrants were somewhat startled to discover a stick in front of the center fire, sticking up in the ground, and with a piece of paper fastened to it.

The captain of the train read what was written thereon aloud, and it was as follows:

"WARNING:

"If this train is bound for Sunset Settlement, it is on the wrong road, and will be wrecked."

"If they do not fear to trust the one who writes this, let them follow the staked trail."

This was all, but it set the entire train of emigrants to thinking.

They had little confidence in their amateur guide, for the simple reason he had less in him; but he had been so mysteriously informed.

He had passed the guards, that was evident, and had entered the camp unseen, for who else had put the stake there with his warning?

Then some one came in with the information that a large number of small sprigs had been

cut from a tree near by, and another reported that one was staked out just beyond the camp.

Instantly the captain went to this stake, and it had evidently been placed there under cover of the night.

After all a close scrutiny showed that another stake had been placed, and then it was decided to follow the trail they marked out.

The order was soon issued, and the train pulled slowly out of its camping-place.

Following the stakes, which were placed about a mile apart, with a bunch of prairie grass upon each, the train moved on.

Then the mysterious affair was talked over, and the fact made those unseen guides, as the single horse had been left from stake to stake.

Could it be the Forest Phantom? Such was the question asked by all.

It must be, many thought, for had he not faithfully guided the hunters back to their camp the night before?

After an hour's halt the train again moved, and passed through a valley that divided the range of hills out upon the prairie beyond.

Not caring to go away from a good camping-ground, to perhaps make a dry camp, as upon the prairie, the captain of the train called a halt just in the shelter of the hills, although there had been but about fifteen miles made that day.

And as soon as night came, and all gathered around the camp fire, the subject of conversation was those unseen guides.

Placing the guards, the camp again sank to rest, and no sound disturbed them through the night; and the guards neither heard nor saw anything of a suspicious nature to alarm them.

But, strange to say, when the dawn came, there, in front of the captain's tent, was the stake, driven into the ground under the shadow of the night, and upon it was a piece of paper, evidently torn, as had the other piece been, from off an old letter, and written in pencil.

The writing was legible, but by no means written by a scribe.

This second note read:

"You are doing right! Follow the staked trail."

And all through the day the train did follow the staked trail, and the stakes were so placed to guide them, though they were further apart than the day before.

At dark the train reached a small stream, and in the face of the willow and cotton-woods upon its banks went into camp.

Hardly had the fires been lighted when, far off upon the prairie, a light was visible, and the emigrants gazed at it long and earnestly, for who could have built it unless it was their unseen guide!

Some wished to go and see, but this the train captain would not allow, as he knew well he was in a dangerous country, for both train robbers and Indians were to be dreaded in that border land.

After blazing for half an hour the distant fire died out, and then all was blackness upon the prairie.

At an early hour the train again pulled out, and the staked trail led directly over the spot where had been the fire the night before.

A small stream was crossed, and they were on the bank of a large stream, and there were only a dozen cottonwoods near to form a shelter for a camp.

But there, evidently, had their unseen guide camped, for they could see where blankets had pressed down the grass beneath the trees and where a horse had fed about the lonely camp.

On through the day pulled the train, until they came to a spot that was an excellent camping-ground, and here they halted.

Again were fires kindled, and after supper the emigrants assembled around them for a talk, the one topic of conversation being about their unseen guide.

Then there were croakers in the party, for some would say if he was honest he would show himself.

Others feared he was leading them into a trap, until at last the general opinion was against the unseen guide.

But his stanch friends were the hunting-party whom he had guided back to camp.

They all maintained that he was true, whatever he was, or it was ghost or man.

Some too believed they were being led by a spoke, for a mysterious light shone great away over the minds of people two-score years ago, and even now may believe in the supernatural.

* A camp with no water near.

* The real name of California Joe is unknown, some say that it was Joseph Miller, others that it was Joseph Hawk, but that he was a distant relative of Daniel Boone. Of where he was born, his parents and early boyhood life, he never spoke, as he died leaving all a mystery behind him.

At last, after a warm discussion upon the subject, it was decided not to follow the stalked trail the following day, but to take their bearings as well as they were able, and endeavor to find their way to Sunset Settlement as best they could.

Hardly had they come to this conclusion, and were about to separate for the night, to go to their respective quarters, when suddenly into their midst came a white horse, and upon his back was the rider in black.

A few of the women screamed, men sprang to their feet, and at once all was a scene of excitement, as they gazed upon the snow-white steed and his sable-clad rider.

CHAPTER III.

"JOE."

That the four guards had been stationed about the camp, the number nightly placed on duty, all the emigrants knew, and yet through the line, apparently unseen by them, the white horse and sable-clad rider had come.

All gazed upon him an instant in silence, and he at them, as though awaiting for them to speak.

They beheld a mow-white steed of perfect symmetry, his mouth unbridled by a bit, and his back not weighted by a saddle.

Instead of the former was a long lariat about his neck, and in place of the latter were several blankets fastened on with a surcingle.

The rider was a youth of seventeen perhaps, strange to say, clad in a suit of black broadcloth that looked as though he must have done service for his father's Sunday wear, or upon the form of some itinerant person.

The coat was buttoned up close, as though to hide the absence of a waistcoat, and he rode into the tops of which the pants were stuck, were four sizes too large for the wearer.

The hat was a black felt, and it too seemed never to have been intended to fit the head upon which it rested.

He carried a rifle large enough for a man of full size, and a pair of revolvers, knife, and hatchet in a horse-bag.

To the emigrants he appeared like one who had found his clothing and arms separately, and his appearance seemed to tell the story, in connection with the graves in the forest where the party of hunters had first seen him, of one who might be the only survivor of some fearful massacre of a few little settlement or wagon train, and had gone back after flying for his life, to find all the loved ones dead, and had picked up for his last resting place.

So it seemed to those who saw him, and his pale face rather added to this surmise being true.

It was a bold, fearless face, a trifle reckless, with earnest black eyes, fall of fire, and that seemed to look straight into one's soul.

His form was well-built, sinewy and supple, and yet he looked like one who had been ill, or else met with some great sorrow. Seeing that the emigrants were too much surprised at his unexpected appearance to speak, the strange youth said bluntly:

"Good-evening, folks."

"Good-evening, my young friend," returned the captain pleasantly, and then the others nodded at the salutation, and then the Train Boss continued:

"May I ask your name, my friend?"

"Joe."

"Joe?"

"Yes, Joe."

"But you have another name?"

"Isn't Joe name enough?"

"Certainly, if you do not care to be known by any other."

"I don't," was the frank reply.

Captain Reynolds was both surprised and interested in the young stranger, so he said:

"I believe we are to thank you for staking a trail out for us the past two days?"

"Yes, for you were going wrong, if you were heading for Sunset Settlement."

"There is where we are going."

"Well, you were going wrong; so I put you right."

"You are sure you are right, are you?"

"I know," was the quiet rejoinder, and then he said: "Well, we do not, for your guide took sick and died some days ago, and we were going by guess, aided by one of the teamsters, who had been over the trail he had made."

"Guess is a bad trail to follow in these parts, stranger, and, as it is, you are in danger."

"Ha! Do you know of any danger threatening us?" quickly asked Captain Reynolds.

"Yes."

"You will of course tell us what it is?"

"That is what I came here for."

"You are very kind, and I am remiss in not offering the hospitalities of our camp."

"Dismount, and let us give you some supper."

"I have been to supper, sir; but I'll tell you that the red-skins have laid an ambush for you."

"Ha! That is news, indeed!"

"But how know you this?"

"I rode upon their camp-to-night."

"To-night?"

"Yes; they are about ten miles from here, and their spies have been watching you all day."

"They would have come nearer, but are afraid of me."

"Afraid of you?"

"Yes; they think I am a spook, or what they call an Evil Spirit."

It was on the tip of Captain Reynolds's tongue to say:

"I don't blame them; for we half thought so too."

But he said instead:

"What makes them think so?"

"Because I live alone on the prairies, and in the forests and hills."

"Here you no home?"

"No."

"Where are your parents?"

"I have no parents," was the reply, in the same tone in which he had before spoken.

"But you have friends?"

"I have no friends."

"How long you live in this wild land alone?"

"Yes."

"But the Indians—"

"They don't harm me. I harm them," was the laconic response.

Captain Reynolds saw that he had a strange character to deal with, but was anxious to find out more about him, so asked:

"How long have you—"

"Say, stranger, I didn't come here to be asked questions, but to tell you that your train is in danger," abruptly said the youth, and he continued:

"My name, as I told you, is Joe, and I wonder about the prairie, and that is all you need know about me, but I know that Old Blood and two hundred warriors are laying for your train."

"You go on to-morrow, you run right into their ambush, but if you stay here, they will come to-morrow night and attack you."

"How do you know this, my young friend?"

"I know Injuns' ways, and Bad Blood is on the war-path."

"If you want right on he would wait for you, but you did not, he'd think you stopped for rest and attack you."

"And what would you advise?"

"My advice would be to lay a trap for Bad Blood."

"But how, Joe?"

"A mile further on is a stream with the prairie on one side and a bluff on the other."

"On the bluff is a thicket, and the hills rise beyond."

"You can camp on the prairie, making a circle of your wagons, and the dummies, about the fire, and put all the women and children in a dugout you can make, while you and your men take the bluff and shoot down every Indian that comes into camp."

"Well, Joe, you advise like a general and we will follow your advice."

"Then would you say move?"

"Now, and I will guide you to the spot, and then when the Injuns attack you, I'll be around somewhere, was the very significant reply of the strange youth."

CHAPTER IV.

PREPARING FOR THE WORST.

SOMEHOW, all in the emigrant train, once they looked into the bosom face of the mysterious youth who answered only to the appellation of Joe, trusted him.

The grumblers became silent, and the entire train was anxious to follow his advice.

He sat upon his horse watching the emigrants get ready for the night, and then rode on ahead as they pulled out of camp.

Captain Reynolds rode forward with him, and more and more interested in the strange youth, tried to draw him out to speak more of himself; but in vain, for Joe was reticent in a wonderful degree about himself, and made no account of why he was there in that wild region, the reason for his coming or whom he had come to.

In referring to the graves in the forest, by

which he had been seen seated on his horse, when first discovered by the hunters, he made no reply.

"Whose graves are they, Joe?" asked Captain Reynolds, kindly.

Joe made no response.

"Poor boy, I fear those you loved are in them, and that they were victims of some massacre," Captain Reynolds said.

"How many fighting men have you got, capt'n?" asked Joe, as though he had not heard the foregoing remarks of his companion.

"Twenty-seven, men and boys that can handle a rifle well."

"Couldn't you drum up a few more?"

"There are several more boys that might be made useful."

"Boys are as good as men often, I guess," was the laconic response, and looking at Joe, Captain Reynolds felt that he at least was.

"Well, then, I can make the force thirty-one."

"No women what know how to shoot a rifle?" asked Joe, with utter disregard for the proprieties of the Queen's English.

"Yes, but I wouldn't have them risk danger."

"Better risk it than make it certain."

"How do you mean, Joe?"

"I mean that if you've got any women-folks that can shoot, take 'em on the bluff with you, and pour in a heavy fire the first time."

"Then, and then you've got extra rifles and shot-guns, load 'em and lay 'em by the men to use, and the women can reload the other weapons."

"I tell you, capt'n, that Bad Blood is an old soldier for fighting, and he has got two hundred braves."

"But if you can knock about fifty under the first two volleys, and then pour the music in your life, you'll see those Injuns dig out in style."

"You seem to be an old soldier, too, Joe, for your advice is good, and I will follow it."

"I've seen some fighting," was the cool reply, and then Joe rode up to the stream and said:

"Now here is camp, and you can't find a better place."

So it seemed, for the stream made a bend just there, and the point ran in toward the bluff which formed the other bank.

This provided a space of about an acre for a camp, and the wagons were stationed right across from the stream on one side to the other forming thereby a breastwork.

The cattle were corralled in a circle formed by the vehicles, and the camp-fires were built near the bank beneath the bluff and under the shelter of a few trees lying upon the point of land.

As the stream was not thirty feet in width, a tree was felled that made a bridge across it, and standing upon this, Joe very skillfully threw his lasso and caught the nose of a ranch of the tree growing upon the bluff forty feet above.

Up this he went with the agility of a sailor, and soon hauled up a rope ladder hastily constructed, and which he made fast to a tree-trunk.

"That's called Gable Bluff, and there's no way to get on top excepting you go up as I did, by fastening your lasso on some tree growing near the edge."

"It's only a few acres in size, and the banks are steep and round, and would be a good place to hide the children and women," said Joe.

Then he gave advice about not having the guards set the following night, but to keep the stock feeding all night near by upon the prairie, but to fasten them securely in their corral of wagons at sunset.

"And the dummies you spoke of, Joe?" asked Captain Reynolds.

"Oh, yes; you must keep your camp-fires burning brightly, and dress up plenty of clothes to look like the real ones, and make them for they will be what the reds will go for."

"Now I must go, but I guess I'll be round near when the Injuns come," and without another word he rode away to his room.

Then he sprang upon his horse, with the ease of a circus rider, he rode out of camp at a sweeping gallop, and rode away to the ranch, the request of Captain Reynolds for him to remain with them as they grew.

CHAPTER V.

JOE MAKES A GRAND CAPTURE.

FROM Captain Reynolds down to the smallest child in the train, all were pleased with their camp, when daylight came to show them its natural strength of position.

The appearance of having scaled the bluff were all removed before dawn, so that any Indian's watchful eyes that might be upon them, could not detect that any extraordinary efforts for caution and defense had been made by the emigrants, and during the day the hunters went off as far as they dared in pursuit of game.

Yet there was a feeling of anxiety resting upon all, for none knew what the night would bring forth.

One young hunter had detected afar off, over a roll of the prairie, a head peering at him, apparently, and he had noticed that it was a red-skin, and he reported it to Captain Reynolds, upon his return to camp; but this was all that was seen in the slightest degree suspicious.

As for Joe, he was nowhere visible during the day, but the captain had perfect confidence in the strange youth, and felt that he was somewhere about, and on the watch.

At last the shadows of night began to fall, the cattle were driven in to the corral of wagons, and nearly all the force set to work with a will, preparing for the work before them.

The wagons were ditched, so that they could not be easily moved, and dirt and boxes were piled against them, as much as possible to shield the animals from the shots, and to prevent their breaking out of the enclosure in their fright, when the fight began.

Dummies representing human beings were scattered here and there about the fires, having the appearance of men, and the rope ladder being placed so that the trees kept the firelight from revealing it; the women and children were taken up to the bluff and placed in a secure retreat a few yards back in the timber.

By degrees the men, acting for the benefit of any watching red-skins, and to keep the women and children from being alarmed, went down the blanket ladders about the fires and then crawl away in the darkness to gain the rope ladder leading to the bluff.

At last Captain Reynolds and a few others, not wishing to delay longer, threw more wood upon the fires and retired to the few tents, to await out from the rear of them and seek safety upon the bluff.

Then not an eye, other than those of the smaller children, was directed toward the bluff. The boys of twelve even had been brought forward to aid in the first volley, and so had a number of the women.

All the fire-arms were there was a large supply in the train—had been laid along upon the edge of the bluff ready for use.

Soon all was as quiet as the grave in the camp and none would have believed that that peaceful slumber reigns supreme.

Slowly the hours dragged along, and then the watchers upon the bluff saw a dark form glide through the line of wagons into the inclosure.

Then another and another, until several dozen, aroused by their presence, and which none of the emigrants knew how to cry, came down the bluff with them, began to bark furiously and to fly at the intruders.

Then arose a wild, thrilling war-cry, and a hundred savage throats answered it, as the red-skins sent a cloud of arrows flying into the camp at the supposed sleepers and into the tents, and rushed forward to begin the red work for which they had come.

The burning fire showed their buckskin-clad forms, painted faces, and gaudily beaked heads, and as the darkness deepened, the warriors, yelling like demons, Captain Reynolds shouted:

"All together! Fire!"

Two-score rifles were discharged as one weapon, almost, and full half as many red-skins dropped dead in their tracks.

Then the line of the bluff seemed to be on fire, so constant were the rattling of the emigrants' rifles and revolvers, and the women and boys reloading, there was kept up a continual discharge upon the snarling and howling rebels, meeting no foe to grapple with and falling by the dozen under the merciless bullets of the pale-faces, broke and ran at all quarters.

"You men follow me," cried Captain Reynolds, as he descended the rope ladder and crossed the fallen tree-bridge to the camp.

Quickly he was obeyed, and dashing over the dead and dying Indians lying here and there, he gained the wagon line of breastworks and poured a hot fire upon their flying foes, who

seemed utterly panic-stricken at the terrific punishment they had met with, where they had expected an easy victory, plenty of scalps and quantities of booty.

And off on the prairie was seen the flash of a rifle, then other flashes and reports, as though coming from revolvers, and then came to the ears of the emigrants a rumbling sound like the thunder of a battle.

The flying red-skins heard it too, and there were wild yells of fury, that proved something had gone wrong, and the next instant, along the bluff leading by the camp, dashed a band of mustangs, saddled and bridled, but riderless. As in their rear rushed a snow-white steed, with a rider upon its back, hooting and yelling like mad as he sped along.

A way past the camp rushed the drove, and as the single rider in their midst went by, he shouted:

"I'm Joe, and I've captured their whole outfit of ponies."

Look sharp, for they may be back on you, and return in a couple of days to guide you to Sunset Settlement."

And as he passed, out of sight, driving the mustangs at full speed, and having by his grand capture added old Bad Blood and his entire band to the camp.

CHAPTER VI.

JOE'S LITTLE GAME.

JOE, whatever time he had been upon the border, or whatever scenes he had passed through, in his meetings with the Reynolds' emigrant train, had certainly been able to become a thorough plainsman.

He could match Indian cunning any time, was able to take care of himself, and seemed to rather enjoy the thought that he was regarded as a spook, or evil spirit.

Though wholly uncommunicative regarding the past and one, young as he was, who certainly had some mysterious history, some strange story to tell, would he but tell it, he was a man of fact, for his life was unspiced upon ordinary matters, he had plenty to say.

After having warned the train of their danger, and guided them to a place of safety at the bluff camp, he had ridden off at a gallop, as though the king given him by little Maggie Reynolds had reopened wounds he had thought were healed.

He had not gone very far from the camp before he saw a dark form suddenly spring from the grass behind him.

Then another and another, until two mustangs, which had been lying down by the side of their masters, were flying away at full speed, and upon their backs were two riders.

But Joe did not hesitate at sight of them, but, on the contrary, let his horse increase his speed.

"They are Bad Blood's spies, and they know just who I am," he muttered.

After a while, as he gained rapidly upon the flying red-skins, he said:

"I was anybody else, I'd have got an arrow in my back, but then I'm afraid of me."

Urging his white horse to a still greater speed, which the splendid animal seemed readily to obey, he soon drew within close pistol range of the two red-skins.

"It don't seem exactly right to shoot 'em, when they won't shoot back, thinking I'm a spook, and they'll report mighty soon that I was coming from the pale-face camp, and then they won't believe I'm an evil spirit, so I guess I'd better kill 'em."

With this, Joe threw his hand forward quickly, and it held a revolver, a weapon at that time almost unknown upon the plains.

Then he followed two sharp shots, and the two riders fell from their saddles without a cry, for Joe's aim was deadly.

Although relieved of their weight, the ponies were still a match for the white animal, Joe rode, who was alongside of them in a minute's time, and both were quickly caught.

Then back to where the Indians lay went the boy, and he found them just as he knew he would, dead.

It was but the work of a few minutes to place them in the hands of the white animal, Joe rode, who was alongside of them in a minute's time, and both were quickly caught.

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It was but the work of a few minutes to place them in the hands of the white animal, Joe rode, who was alongside of them in a minute's time, and both were quickly caught.

Then back to where the Indians lay went the boy, and he found them just as he knew he would, dead.

To remove the two scalp-locks, with a dexterity that showed he had had practice in the art of scalping, was but an instant's work with Joe, after which he took their weapons and robes, and rode off on the prairie as fast as he could.

The current carried them swiftly away, and then the strange boy built a small fire in a ravine, cooked some dried meat upon the coals, and spread a couple of his blankets over a log upon the ground, rolled his blankets around him and was almost instantly asleep.

The coming of dawn did not seem to disturb him in the least, but when the sun arose, he got up, cooked his breakfast, and, leading his two captured ponies, started on up into the hills.

At last he gained a point of observation from whence he could see the distant bluff and camp of the emigrants, and, after a close observation of the surrounding country, he again settled himself down to rest.

When the sun drew near the western horizon, he mounted his horse, and, leading the ponies, started to descend to the prairie once more.

It was dark when he gained the level lands, and, as though resolved upon his course, he went off at a slope in the direction of the emigrant camp.

A drive of several mules brought him in sight of the camp-fires, and then he went along at a slower pace.

Drawing nearer, he at length came to a halt and looked ahead of him for a long time in silence.

"They're coming!" he murmured.

He uttered the words in a matter-of-fact kind of tone, and, dismounting, at once ordered his horse to lie down.

The intelligent and faithful animal at once obeyed, and the Joe went to one of the ponies and ordered him down too.

Whatever the brute might have done for his pale-face captives, he certainly would not for his pale-face captives.

But in an instant he was hopped and thrown upon his side in a manner that proved to him he had a master in the man.

Then Joe took something from a pouch and besmeared his face with it, and next put upon his head the feather bonnet of one of the dead Indians, and about his shoulders a blanket.

"We'll go now, pony," he said, at the same time throwing himself upon the back of the other mustang.

Leaving his own horse lying flat down in the long prairie grass, and the mustang hopped, Joe rode on directly toward the emigrant camp, the fire of which he saw was burning brightly, not two miles distant.

After riding considerably nearer, he halted and waited.

With some patience that would have been shown by an Indian, Joe sat upon the mustang watching and waiting.

Suddenly he saw forms pass between him and the light of the fire, and he knew that Bad Blood and his warriors were preparing for the attack.

Slowly he drew nearer, and he saw that the warriors had dismounted, and, as he had felt assured, were approaching the camp on foot.

Then Joe turned to the right-about and went rapidly back to where he had left his horse and the hopped mustang.

Quickly he got them both up, and hiding the white animal under robes and blankets, he mounted him and rode toward the camp once more.

Passing the spot where he had before halted, he continued on until he could hear the snoring and stamping of the red-skins' mustangs, and again he stopped and stalked out the three horses.

As he ran on foot he approached the herd, and gained their midst without attracting the attention of any of the guards, who were little dreaming of danger from that point, and were taken up with their own distance they had to the attack of their comrades, which was to bring them scalps and plunder.

From horse to horse Joe glided, his sharp knife serving him for a weapon, and in a few moments' time he had set free the lot, excepting the few near the guards, who, five in number, were sitting together waiting to hear the sound of conflict begin.

The Indians had left their horses over a mile from the camp, so that no noise or sound should alarm the guards, who, five in number, were sitting together waiting to hear the sound of conflict begin.

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red fiends as they rushed upon what they supposed were their victims.

Then, like a deer, Joe ran back toward his horses, threw the robes and blankets off of his own animal, and leading the two mustangs by long lariats, dashed toward the ponies of the red-skins.

Firing his pistol, yelling, and at full speed he charged the herd and at once, as he had foreseen, began a wild stampede.

The guards in vain tried to check their flight, and over them the frightened animals dashed, driven straight toward the camp.

As he feared it, by the flaming up of the fire, Joe saw that the red-skins had been badly hurt, and were flying too, and he increased the racket behind the charging mustangs.

Not, for an instant believing that their own animals were stampeded, and fearing that they were charging soldierly, the red-skins fled from their ponies at first, until too late they discovered their mistake.

And on by the camp rushed the frightened ponies, held at their speed by Joe, to disappear in the darkness beyond, though the thunder of their hoofs was long heard by the emigrants in the camp, and the enraged and skulking Indians, as they fell back toward their own village, too utterly demoralized for their savage chief to bring them again to the attack.

CHAPTER VII.

JOE STRIKES A BARGAIN.

THE sentinel at Fort — was considerably surprised the next morning, after the attack on the emigrant train, while waiting to be relieved from duty, to see, what he at first supposed, was a regiment of cavalry coming toward him.

A closer look however showed him that though the equine portion of a regiment was there the bipeds were wanting.

In other words the horses were riderless.

At a slow, weary trot they came on over a distant roll of the prairie, nearly two hundred in number, and they were heading directly for the fort.

The sentinel sung out for the corporal of the guard, and made his report, and that worthy reported to the sergeant, who so on to the officer of the day, which sent the news flying through the fortress that:

"A drove of wild horses was coming."

Officers at once ordered out their own steel, seized their lances, and scouts and hunters joining them, all dashed out from the stockade inclosure to suddenly deny that the herd had a driver.

What could it mean?

There was but one man behind them and he was waving his hat as though for those at the fort to head them off.

A line was quickly formed, and the herd was headed straight for the corral, and were at once secured, while all seemed anxious to see the single driver of so many ponies that had upon them the bridle and saddles they knew belonged to red-skin masters.

As this person rode up he saluted the officers and said bluntly:

"They are Indian ponies,"

"So I see, my young friend; but who are you?" asked the major in command of the fort, and a thorough sportsman he had come out for a wild horse chase as he had supposed.

"Oh I'm Joe, was the quick reply to the officer.

"Joe who, or Joe, what?" asked the major with a smile, looking fixedly at the strange youth before him.

"Either one or t'other, for it's all the same to me."

"But no matter about me, for I've brought you some ponies I'll sell to you for the soldiers if you want to buy 'em, and if you don't, I guess I'll give 'em to you."

"I think it would be cheaper for me to say I don't care to buy, and then you can keep 'em only."

"Guess it would, so you can have 'em, all but my white here," was the cool response.

"No, my young friend, I'll buy them of you, for we are sadly in need of stock just now."

"How many have you?"

"I tried to count 'em but I was driving 'em but one time I made a thousand, next time only seventy, and then I run 'em up to eight hundred, so I don't know; but I guess there are about two hundred — or more."

"Well, I'll give you thirty dollars a head for them."

"I'll take it," was the frank response.

"I — what did you get them, my young friend?"

"I captured them from old Bad Blood and his braves."

"Hut that old fiend is then on the war path?"

"When and where did this happen?" and it was evident that the words of Joe created great excitement.

"Fifty miles from here, at Gable Bluff, and last night several hours before daybreak."

"And you dismounted old Bad Blood and his warriors, you say?"

"No, they dismounted themselves, and I drove their ponies off while they were attacking a camp."

"This grows most interesting, young man."

"Come, tell me all about it, as we ride toward my quarters."

Joe told his story as it had happened, but not a word regarding himself could the major get from him, that is of his antecedents.

He refused all hospitality extended to him by the generous and kind-hearted major, and telling him to keep his money for the ponies for him until he called for it, he mounted his white horse and rode away from the fort, leaving the impression with all who had seen him that he was a very mysterious person.

But the services he had rendered in dismounting old Bad Blood and his braves made him a hero, and the major at once ordered a squadron of cavalry off on the trail of the old chief and his braves, for Joe had told them how to go to head them off on their way toward the village, which he knew that they would at once make for to get a remount, as an Indian who is a good horseman, feels as though he had lost a part of himself in losing his pony.*

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BROKEN PROMISE.

THE morning following their successful battle with the Indians, the emigrants were greatly excited with victory, and yet not anxious for the future, as they knew not what was in store for them.

Every trace of their foes, excepting those who lay dead in and about the camp, had disappeared.

But those who had fallen, and they lay from the camp-fire back to the wagon line, lay as ghastly reminders of the night of red war.

There were nearly half a hundred of them, for the emigrants had fired with true aim, and the soldiers had taken them together for full a minute, in the full blaze of the fire.

An arrow wound or two was all to report upon the side of the pale-faces, excepting a few shot killed by stray bullets in the night of their fright and desperate efforts to escape.

"And all this we owe to that noble boy," said Captain Reynolds, with feeling, and there was no dissenting voice, though many were anxious regarding his safety.

The dead braves were quickly buried on the river bank, and the camp placed in order, after which the works were strengthened to meet another attack, should one be intended.

The cattle were driven out upon the prairie to feed, and securely guarded against roving a surprise, and those in camp looked to their arms which had served them so well.

Thus the day passed away and Joe did not return.

But he had promised to do so, and none doubted that promise.

Now, coming on, the women and children were taken upon the bluff once more, and the men nearly all stood guard.

Excepting the bowl of a wolf upon the prairie no sound broke the stillness of the night and dawn came once more, greatly to the relief of the emigrants.

But Joe came not with it, and all began to feel anxious about him.

"Do you think he intended coming back?" asked one.

"He is promised to do so, and to guide us to the settlement, and if he is alive he will keep that promise," said Captain Reynolds firmly.

Again the day was drawing to a close, and still Joe's promise had not been kept.

But suddenly a cry was heard from one of the men driving in the cattle:

"He is coming!"

All eyes looked across the prairie, and far off, just over a roll of the prairie, was visible a white horse and rider.

A shout of joy at once went up from every voice in camp at this joyful sight.

But almost instantly it was changed to cries of terror and a scene of excitement.

*The Comanches and several other tribes, are most cowardly when dismounted, but the bravest of the brave on horseback.

—THE AUTHOR.

"Indians!"

"Red-skins!"

"To your posts—al!"

Such were the cries, as, following the horseman, were visible scores of other riders.

They were coming on at an easy pace, and heading directly for the camp.

Quickly the women and children ascended to the bluff, and the fighting members of the train arranged to resist attack.

"They are soldiers!"

This cry from one of the men quickly relieved all fears, and a closer look now revealed the fact that they were indeed not Indians, but gallant troopers.

It was just sunset as they rode up to the camp, and Captain Reynolds met the officer in command.

It was Van Dorn, the same officer who had purchased from Joe the herd of Indian ponies.

"I am glad to see you, sir, and, as you may observe, we were prepared to give you a different welcome, believing you to be Indians. Dismount, please, with your men, and accept the hospitality of our camp," said Captain Reynolds pleasantly.

"Thank you, sir; I shall accept your invitation with pleasure, as it is camping time."

"Let the men go into camp, Captain Stewart," said the commander, and dismounting, he continued:

"I am Major Earl Van Dorn, your commander of Fort —, and learning of the attack upon you, through a mysterious youngster, I went in pursuit of old Bad Blood and his dismounted warriors, and to meet a severe whipping."

"Yes, sir, we owe it to that mysterious boy—"

"Joe."

"Yes, Joe is what he calls himself, and we owe it to him that we were not all massacred," said Captain Reynolds gave Major Van Dorn the story of their being guided and warned by Joe.

"But who is he?" asked the major.

"I cannot tell you, sir, more than having heard our guide speak of a mysterious person, and rider often seen back upon the trail, and whom they called the Forest Phantom."

"I, too, have heard camp-fire yarns about such a person, and am glad to know that it is out to be real flesh and blood. But you say the boy has not returned?"

"No, sir, but he has promised to do so, and to act as our guide on to the Sunset Settlement."

"I will give you an escort then, sir, for there are other bands of red-skins roving about; but I hope no harm has befallen the youth."

Captain Reynolds then learned of the visit Joe had made to the fort, and that he had left there to return to the train.

"This looks bad, for the boy would not have broken his promise unless harm had befallen him," said Captain Reynolds.

But the night passed away, and under escort of the soldiers the train pulled out for its destination, for Joe had not returned.

"When I reach the fort I will put my best scouts upon his trail and search for the boy," was the major's remark to Captain Reynolds, as he left the train well on its way to the settlement, and under a good guide to conduct it there.

CHAPTER IX.

LEAP FOR LIFE.

WHEN Joe left the fort he had directed for the camp of the emigrants, for he was anxious to get back and guide them out of the dangerous country into which their being without a guide had led them.

He had gone but a few miles when he crossed a trail that he was convinced was made by Indians.

The tracks showed that it was a large force, and the trail was so fresh that he determined to follow it and see just who had made it, as the direction in which he knew would lead him to the emigrant train on its way to Sunset Settlement.

If he could discover that the Indians, hearing in some way of the coming train, had determined to lay in wait for its coming by a certain point, by knowing where they would place their ambush, he could flank them and thus put them at fault.

It was with such determination that he struck the trail and cautiously followed it.

He had not proceeded very far before he knew that there were fully a hundred horses that had

*Afterward Major-General Earl Van Dorn of the late Confederate Army. He was shot by one of his staff-officers the third year of the Civil War.

—THE AUTHOR.

ing discovered, but did not tarry on this account in his rapid run until he had placed the point of the ridge between him and his foes.

Seeing a ravine a short distance before him, he turned into it in a twinkling, and was brought to a halt by its terminating abruptly.

He was about to retrace his way when the ringing war-cries from the direction of the pool told him that his flight was discovered, and he knew then that his situation was desperate.

CHAPTER XI.

JOE'S HUNT.

THOUGH TROOP certainly did look desperate for Joe, he did not lose his presence of mind.

His eyes scanned the sides of the cliff in his front, but he saw that a squirrel could not scale them.

Then he caught sight of what appeared to be a break in the solid wall, and toward this he bounded.

It was where the ravine turned, but the walls were no alike, that Joe had believed he was at the end of the canyon, or gulch.

Now he saw that it went beyond where he stood several hundred feet, but there certainly did exist, though the yawning mouth of a cavern extended on beneath the level of the canyon.

It took Joe but an instant to reach the cavern and dart into it.

Once within its dark shelter and he turned to look back over his track, to see if his foes were in sight, and to his delight he discovered that they were not, though he could hear them coming upon his trail like a pack of hounds.

Before reconnoitering his quarters, Joe set to work upon his rifle.

He knew he had no time to draw the charge, so he began to work the nipple, beating it down into the barrel by thumping it with his fist.

Steadily he worked at this, although a loud, echoing shout told him the red-skins were close upon him.

The next moment they appeared around the bend of the canyon and came to a halt, pointing at the cavern and gesturing with their rifles.

But Joe kept on with his priming until the tube would hold no more, and then he placed a cap upon it, and laying it down took up his revolver.

From each nipple the cap was removed and a close examination made, and in several a few grains of powder were seen to remain.

"Now, I guess I'm ready," said the plucky boy, as he laid his weapons down ready for use, and, rising, unfolded his blankets and hung them upon the cavern walls, to let the water drip from them.

In the mean time his foe, a score in number, had all appeared in sight, and Joe recognized those he had seen upon the cliff, and who seemed to be now the ringleaders of the others.

They seemed to be urging the others to make a rush upon the cavern, for they had followed the boy's trail and knew he could be nowhere else.

"I guess that fellow on the spotted pony is wanted in the Happy Hunting grounds," said Joe to himself, and he stooped for his rifle.

But hardly had he done so when a perfect shower of arrows came flying into the cavern, the Indians having captured and flung them to their bows unseen by Joe, and at a word from their leader, fired them.

Had the boy not stooped for his rifle as he had, and which was laid upon one side of the cavern, he would have been pierced by half a dozen arrows.

But, as it was, not one touched him, though several came dangerously near.

With this volley of arrows the red-skins started upon a charge for the cavern, and instantly the boy's rifle went off, and his finger drew on the trigger.

This time there was no misfire, and the warrior on the spotted Mustang went down.

"I knew they wanted him," said Joe, as he whipped up his revolver and began to fire away.

One, two, three shots, and no more were necessary, for the red-skins knew not then what the deadly revolver was, and imagined they had run upon other foes than the brave boy whom they had brought to bay.

A mustang killed, another with a broken leg, and a brave wounded, Joe saw were the results of his pistol practice, and he could not restrain a burst of mocking laughter, as the red-skins ran helter-skelter for the bend in the ravine.

They sent a reverend volley of arrows back into the cavern, and then disappeared; but Joe knew that they had by no means given him up.

"They'll not come back right off, I guess, so I'll look around and see where I am," muttered Joe, as he reloaded his rifle and then looked about him.

His great distance back from the entrance all was darkness; but Joe was provided with a tin box full of matches, and he quickly gathered up the arrows, heaped them together, whittled off splinters to kindle with, and made a jutting point of the cavern lighted his fire to have a look around him.

In spite of Joe's fire-and-earr air in danger, and great nerves, what he beheld by the aid of the fire-light, caused a cry of horror to break from his lips.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DEATH-CAVERN.

AFTER his first cry of horror at what he saw in the cavern, when his little fire blazed up, Joe uttered a light laugh, for he was not one to be unmoved for any length of time.

"Holy smoke! but the dead folk did scare me for a minute," he said, and then coolly glanced around upon what had so suddenly and unexpectedly met his gaze and disturbed his equanimity for the once.

What he saw were rows of corpses in an almost mummy state of dryness, ranged along upon a scaffolding on either side of the cavern.

It was so that he was in a position to see the ground, and from what he understood of those red-skins in the canyon, he was aware that it was not a belonging of their tribe, even if they knew nothing of its existence, which was doubtful.

"I'd like to give 'em a scare that would last 'em a long time," he said, and he began to think, in thought, a sure sign with him that he was plotting mischief.

At last he laughed, and that settled it that he had decided what to do.

The air of the charnel house was loathsome in the extreme, but for this Joe did not then care.

Creeping up the ravine, to see that the Indians were not in sight, he swung his blanket before him to catch the arrows they might fire at him, and at once set to work.

Throwing his lassie up over a pole of the scaffolding, he clambered up alongside of the dead Indians and took a quiet survey of rows by the light of his fire.

He saw that they were ranged in rows upon each side of the cavern, the platform of poles upon which they were placed beginning about fifteen feet back from the entrance.

Selecting a dozen of the worst-looking corpses—those from which the flesh had fallen from their skulls, leaving the bony face bare and white—Joe lowered them to the floor of the cavern with his lassie, one end of which he then made fast to the pole on one side nearest the entrance, and descending himself, he next fastened the lassie to the opposite side.

With strips of buckskin and blankets, the belongings of the red-skins, he then began to tie the corpses upon the lassie, so that they seemed to be standing up.

Here and there he placed a pole at the back of a corpse to keep the lassie from sagging too much, and he then laid his pole over a row of dead bodies extending across the cavern.

It certainly was a hideous sight, but it amused Joe immensely, and he then gathered enough wood from the scaffold poles to make a large fire.

This he built in a niche of the cavern in such a way that the fire, which he wholly covered with his blankets, to the bottom of which he attached lines made of buckskin and carried them to the scaffolding overhead, where he took up his position, with his rifle and revolver ready.

It was now dark outside, and Joe knew that his foes only waited his gloom to creep upon him.

He understood Indian cunning enough to see that they meant for him to believe that they had gone, as they did not show themselves again; but he knew that they would not depart, leaving their dead "cousins" in the cavern, and he to escape when it was left the cavern.

Lighting his fire, and seeing that his lassie was well concealed by the blankets, Joe drew himself up on the scaffold, and perched there, his weapons lying before him ready for use, and one hand holding the lines attached to the bottom of the blankets, the other grasping the lassie, by pulling upon it, would make the ghastly corpses seem to dance.

His patient and unimpaired by Job, the boy waited, watched and listened.

Without he could see that it was light enough

for him to discover any one approaching the cavern, and there he kept his eyes.

Presently a dark form came before his gaze, and then another, and another.

They stood as softly as panther creeping upon its prey, and soon a score or more stood in silence before the cavern entrance.

Their bodies were bent, their heads pressed forward in the act of listening, and as still as bronze statues they stood.

That was Joe's moment to begin his performance, and a strong pull, with one hand upon the lassie, set his softness to sway and move while with a quick jerk upon the lines he sent a blaze of light into the cavern, revealing the ghastly sight he had seen, and the red-skins, just as they were about to spring into the dark cavern with their knives in hand to meet whatever foe they there might find.

But that which their eyes first saw, illumined by the red glare of the firelight, was more than their superstitious natures could stand, and they darted from the place with howls of terror, and with the speed of the wind down the canyon, each red-skin striving to lead in the mad race from the death cavern.

CHAPTER XIII.

A RECONNOISSANCE.

THE sudden scampering of the frightened red-skins tickled Joe immensely, and half in enjoyment of the fun, half to urge them on to greater speed in the race to stop, he set up a series of most unearthly yells, as though to make the savage believe that they had invaded the infernal regions.

"If they only knew who I was, that the Indians below on the river call me a spook, this would help me top-top, for I even am scared myself," said Joe.

But to keep his foes still going Joe ran after them, yelling as he went, and reaching the abrupt bend in the canyon found that they had not carried there.

But at the entrance of the ravine they had, and Joe discovered that they had been reinforced by the entire band of hunters, who had doubtless been sent for to hurry back.

They were building camp-fires, with evident intention to stop for the remainder of the night, and here Joe stepped in the fire-light, Joe beheld knots of red-skins discussing the fearful sight they had witnessed, and telling their comrades.

"They'll not come again until morning, and then they'll come with a rush, or roll logs before you, which I can't shoot through."

"They have camped for business, and I've got to do something mighty quick, if I want to keep my hair, and I do."

Cautiously Joe left then his place of reconnaissance, and proceeded back to the cavern, for he saw the utter impossibility of getting out of the canyon.

One thing gave him hope, and that was the wild cat came through the canyon, and the smoke from his fire had been blown back into it, and in it he could be assured.

If it did this there must be another opening, and he must find it.

His blankets had dried by the heat of the fire, and he rolled them up and strapped them, with his other belongings, upon his back.

Securing his lassie, he left the mummy-like corpses where they lay, lying in rows across the cavern entrance, and then, with a torch he manufactured, he set out upon his reconnaissance.

He followed the cloud of smoke through several winding passageways, and discovered that the cavern was indeed a perfect charnel house, or huge tomb, for hundreds of bodies were there.

"Holy Smoke! hasn't I scared," he said to himself, as he glanced upon the grim lines of dead Indians, yet he did not feel at all as though he were very much frightened.

After walking full a hundred yards he came to a large chamber, or rotunda, and here he halted, holding the torch over his head to have a look around him.

"Woe!" was this in the high mucky muck of all, and it looks as if the whole tribe had died sudden like and been buried here.

"Wonder if 'twas small-pox they had!

"If 'twas I'm in for it.

"Well, well! I've seen old Injuns and squaws, young Injuns and papoose Injuns along the sides, but this is where the high-toned bucks camp out.

"Guess they are all big warriors in here," and in spite of his assumed fright, he glanced coolly around upon the scaffolds with their weight of dead, and saw by the robes, necklaces, feathers, bonnets and weapons that there the dead men only had found burial, such burial as it was.

"I guess this must be where Kit Carson buried his dead Injuns," said Joe, and then he added grimly:

"I've started in pretty well myself in the killing line, and I may have a graveyard as big as Kit's, when I get to be away in years."

"But if I don't get out of this, I'll have only a grave."

He saw that the smoke went up over his head, just where he was standing, and a crevice was visible in the vaulted roof.

Placing his torch some distance off he then returned and looked upward.

To his delight he saw the crevice, and he knew that there was an opening there large enough for him to pass through.

It seemed round, and about the size of a well, and could not be less than a hundred feet to the top.

But how was he to get there? That he soon decided upon, for he set to work building a fire and soon had a bright blaze.

By its light he saw that there was a natural chimney-like opening in the roof, and remembering the height of the hill, he knew that it must be many feet to the top.

Measuring the width with his eye, he saw that it was just wide enough for him to reach each side, by stretching his legs far apart, and his hands too.

"I've been down a well and up again, and I guess I can make it, if the sides ain't smooth as glass," he said.

"Now to make something I can climb upon."

"Injuns, I'm sorry to disturb your rest, but I think more of myself living than I do of you all dead."

"So here goes!"

He jerked one of the scaffolding poles out as he spoke, and with a crash and heavy thud, a score of dead bodies came down to the rocky flooring.

Joe sprung aside to escape being buried, while he cried:

"It's raining corpses, bard."

But the bodies were not exactly what he was after, though he made use of some of them for props for the poles.

Selecting three of the longest poles, he tied the tops together, and then stood them up like Gipsy campfires, the center being directly in the opening in the vaulted roof, which they just reached.

The bodies at the base kept the poles from slipping, and throwing aside the pack on his back, he climbed up one of the uprights as nimbly as a cat could have done.

Standing on the tops, he glanced upward, and when his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he saw to his delight, that the well-like opening continued about the same size all the way through, and that its sides were so uneven and rough that he could manage to make his way to the surface by stretching his feet and hands across it, and thus working his way along.

Descending once more, he tied his lariats to his rifle and belt of arms, and then attached to that a longer line, made from strips he cut from the buffalo and bear robes he found with the dead warriors.

Two long lines he thus made, one for his weapons, the other for his blankets and traps, and then he fastened them to his waist.

But he did not intend to help the red-skins find him, and about the base of each pole he built a large pile which met in the center, so that it would make one grand fire when he got ready to ignite it.

Taking some light sticks for kindling, he fastened them to his pack, and then started upon his ascent of the poles, having divested himself of his huge boots, as he knew he could not climb with them on.

Reaching the top of the poles, he spread himself so to speak, across the well-like opening, and found that he could cling there.

"It's going to be a tough job," he said, realizing fully the great strain it would be upon him, and that a false step would hurl him back to death.

He knew too, should his strength fail him, back he must fall.

But the Indians would visit upon him a worse fate, he well knew, so up he started.

Slowly, first one hand, and then a foot, and so on he went.

The strain now begun to tell on him, and in places he had only the rough rocky side for a footing or hold, instead of as in other places a slight projection, and in each instance it took all his strength to keep from falling.

The smoke too, came up about him, nearly blinding him, and that with the foul air of the building, was sufficing in the extreme.

But on he went, slowly, surely, the sweat dropping from him in great beads, his feet and hands blistering, and the nails of his toes tearing to the quick as he clung to the rough rocks.

Nearer and nearer the top he drew, and yet the way seemed interminable.

No resting-place, his muscles strained raw sore, his blistered hands and feet wearing and bloody, and his weight seeming to be hundreds of pounds.

But Joe had a will of iron, and a nerve not to be subdued, and with shut teeth, and blinded eyes, for the smoke made it impossible for him to see, he struggled on upward.

At last he put his hand out as usual, and he nearly fell, for it met no resistance.

Quickly he felt around him, and knew that he was at the top.

Then he made a violent effort and drew himself over the ledge.

He was safe, but so worn out that he could not move, and lay where he had dragged himself.

He was so blinded that he could not see; but he was content to wait.

The cool air soon revived him, the smoke-blinded eyes were soon able to look about, and he found himself upon a high ridge, overgrown with dwarfed trees.

The stars were shining brightly, and the air was chill, after his experience in the cavern.

But he shook himself together, and seizing the line that was fastened to his arms, lay down upon his back and glanced below.

The foul air and smoke almost stifled him, and he wondered how he could have lived through it.

Slowly he drew on the line and up came his weapons to the top.

He could hardly repress a shout of joy when he grasped them.

Then the blanket-pack was drawn up, and laid beside the rifle, and Joe gathered the fagots, which were like tinder, lighted them, and lowered them quickly to the pile below.

Instantly they blazed up, and a hot roaring fire was the result.

"Nothing hard on the dead Injuns, I guess," he said, with some sympathy for those in the tomb.

Ever and anon he looked down, and saw that the fire was creeping up the poles, and that they would soon be consumed, and all before present no appearance how an escape had been made from the cavern.

Joe was foot-sore, weary, in fact utterly worn out, but he felt it incumbent upon him to place as much distance as possible between him and his foes by moving, so he drew on his over-large boots, wincing with the pain it gave him, and then started upon his way.

But each step was agony to him, and at last he knew he must rest, and the consequences what they might be to him.

CHAPTER XIV.

JOE'S REVENGE.

A FEW moments' rest served to make Joe feel so much better that he decided to move on. Shouldering his pack and rifle once more he did so.

But the effort was most painful, and he soon came to a halt.

It was evident that some bright idea had flashed through his mind, for he stood as instant in deep thought.

Then he said:

"I guess I might as well ride, for there are a hundred ponies over yonder," and he nodded in the direction of the Indian camp, which was about a mile from where he then stood.

Whether the pain was forgotten in the thought of carrying out his plot, he hardly knew himself. But he managed to hobble down the ridge, gain the valley and make round to the timber in front of the canyon, where he had so nearly lost his life.

He had been forced to rest several times, but he smiled grimly, when he came in sight of the camp-fires.

It was almost dawn he knew, and he was anxious to lose no time, as darkness was his only hope.

His knowledge of Indian life made him pitch at once upon the locality where they would be most likely to leave their ponies, and thither he went.

It was upon the side of a hill, where the grass was plenty, and not a hundred yards from the camp-fires, around which he could see groups of warriors squatted, some of them too anxious about what had been seen in the cavern to go to bed.

It was evident that they did not suspect danger, or believed that there were any foes near, other than the ones, or those in the cavern, for they could not account for the several rapid shots fired, unless there were more men than Joe there.

Joe reconsidered carefully, and he selected in his own mind just about where the Indian guards were stationed over the ponies.

He saw that the vale in which they were had steep sides, and narrowed toward a canyon which he knew led out upon the prairie some few miles beyond, for once before he had passed through that way.

The guards, therefore, would naturally be toward the canyon, as none were needed on steep sides of the vale, or toward the camp.

"This helps me immensely, and I guess if my legs hold out, I'll just revenge myself a little," he said in a whisper to himself.

Taking from his pack a buck-skin bag of red paint, he smeared it over his face.

Then he drew out a war-bonnet of feathers, quite a gorgeous affair, and dropping a blanket about his shoulders, most cautiously began to go down the steep side of the hill.

He came near the first pony, and saw by him the smile of a packed must.

To what he needed he coolly helped himself.

Then he cut the lariats that held him to the stake and passed on to the next, repeating the same trick he had with the herd upon the prairie.

The ponies did not know they were free, and in this was his safety.

From mustang to mustang he went, until he drew near the end of the herd, and he dared not go further, as he was aware the guards were near, unless through they might be.

Then he crept back to the upper end, and saw that dawn would be upon him in less than half an hour.

Selecting the pony of the herd, which in the darkness suited him best, he put upon it the Indian saddle and bridle that was near, and mounting, began to slowly drive those that were nearest him down the valley toward the canyon.

Slowly they went at first, then in a trot, until feeling that the stampede was started, Joe

whipped out his revolver, uttered wild yells, and fired seven shots.

As one horse the freed mustangs sprung forward, and at once began a wild race.

Into their midst Joe rode, lying low upon the back of his horse, not to be seen by the Indian guards, and like the roll of thunder resounded the hoofs upon the hard ground.

In vain did the guards strive to check their advance, and turn them back, for they could not stem the mad current, and were forced to fly up the sides of the vale for their lives.

In wild alarm the camp arose behind the equine torrent, and feet-flooded braves rushed in pursuit.

But in vain, the stampede had begun well, and the stakes of those animals which Joe had not freed, were drawn up by the pressure, and the whole herd almost was set going.

Fast the guards they swept, Joe in their midst, and lying low to escape an arrow if seen, and unseen by them, the red-skins could not understand the cause of the sudden stampede.

They had heard the few shots and terrific yells that set the herd agitating, and then no sound followed to betray the presence of an enemy.

And away dashed the herd, with Joe in their rear, chucking at his triumph and his revenge upon his foes.

CHAPTER XV. THE FATAL CRASH.

JOE knew well that he had not gotten every pony of the herd, and he only wondered that he had gotten so many, while he readily understood that as soon as the Indians recovered from their amazement they would mount those mustangs that remained and come in chase.

Should he at once, upon reaching the prairie, desert the herd and save himself upon his own horse, or rather the one he had selected for himself?

Or, if he did so, would not the whole band, as soon as their ponies were recaptured, give up their game and come hot on his trail, to avenge the wrong?

While he was dashing along in the rear of the drove, thinking what was best to be done, in spite of the thunder of the hoofs in front of him, he heard the clatter of hoof-falls behind.

Instantly he drew rein and listened.

"One, two, three."

He counted them slowly, as he recognized from the sound how many there were.

"There may be more behind them, so they won't do any harm if I just give 'em a hint I don't want to be crowded."

So saying, he wheeled his mustang behind a small tree which had slipped down from the bank above, and waited while the herd dashed on.

Soon an Indian came in sight, then another and another.

They had mounted bareback, as Joe could see in the now breaking dawn, and were pushing their ponies hard.

Another thing he discovered was the sound of many feet.

"The whole gang is coming on foot, by the Holy Smoke!" he said.

Then up went his rifle, as the Indian was almost upon him, and the crack followed.

Joe never missed if he had half an aim, and off tumbled the red-skin, while the pony dashed on after the herd.

The other two Indians quickly attempted to wheel their ponies to the right-about, and one succeeded in doing so, but the other had a hard-mouthed animal, and he was anxious to go on after his companions, and before he could stop him, Joe darted out of his hiding-place upon him.

"Injun, I want you," he yelled, and his revolver flashed.

But Joe startled pony reared up just then and got the bullet in his brain and, falling back heavily upon his rider, pinned him beneath him.

Joe spent no time in looking after his foe, but sped on after the herd, just as two score red-skins, running at full speed, came in sight.

"Farewell, Injun," he shouted, waving his hand and looking back.

As they came to the single rider left of their band, Joe saw the brave pulled suddenly off of his pony, and a chief bedecked with feathers spring upon his back.

"That's the Raging Chief, I guess, and he is after me hot as blazes," coolly said the boy, as he sped along, loading his rifle as he went.

"Yes, 'tis he he wants," he continued, as the chief—for so his war-bonnet proclaimed him—urged the pony in pursuit.

"And the others are running a foot race to see the show," continued Joe, as the warriors on foot again bounded forward.

"Come, Injun pony, that feller's got a gun," he cried, urging the mustang on.

But the animal on which the chief was mounted seemed the speedier of the two, for he gained steadily.

"I guess I'll miss his feathers for him," and so saying, Joe came to a halt, wheeled about and brought up his rifle.

The chief saw the act and quickly fired, but without effect, as the bullet flew over the boy's head.

Then he threw himself upon the side of his pony, so as to protect himself and reloading his old musket with marvelous skill and quickness, while the animal circled around at a gallop.

Watching his chance, Joe was about to fire when, before he could do so, a second shot from the chief came, and down dropped his horse, just as his finger pressed the trigger of his rifle.

CHAPTER XVI.

A NOVEL ESCAPE.

ALMOST any one, under the circumstances in which Joe found himself would have given up for lost.

But the boy did not. He first, as he caught himself upon his blistered, bleeding feet, when his mustang fell dead beneath him, turned his eyes upon his foe to watch the effect of his shot.

The shout that broke from his lips proved that it had not been a miss.

Nor had it been a death-shot.

The arm of the chief, over the neck of the pony, had caught the bullet, and the Indian, no longer able to hold on, had dropped to the ground, while his horse had bounded on down the canyon.

A shriek of rage broke from the wounded, foiled chief, and wounded though he was he strove to reach Joe.

But that worthy youth comprehended his danger fully.

And he looked to take advantage of anything that might present itself in his favor.

He saw the flying pony, and knew that the name of the ground would bring him within thirty feet of him.

To the Indian saddle on the pony he had, was a lariat fastened, and to seize this and get it ready was a second's work.

Then, as the chief's horse dashed by he threw it, and with such precision, that, though the animal shied badly, it settled over his neck.

Instantly the mustang was brought to his knees, and almost down, and Joe gave another yell of joy.

But he noticed that the lasso had torn from its hold nearly by the jerk, and that the first bound of the animal would tear it loose.

For him to attempt to hold the animal, by catching the lariat, would be utterly useless, he was well aware, so he bounded toward the mustang to throw himself upon his back.

But, quick as he was, the pony was quicker, had regained his feet, and the lariat was torn loose, just as Joe reached his haunches.

For the flash of a second all seemed lost, for Joe was suffering greatly with his feet, and

the chief and his warriors were not far away; but his quick eyes detected the long tail of the mustang, held up with excitement, and instantly he grasped it with a grip that was not to be shaken off.

With a wild shout of rage and fright the mustang bounded away down the canyon.

But Joe was well off. With his good left hand he held on like grim death, and with his rifle gripped in his right he went along at great bounds.

His feet seemed as though they would split out at every bound, his hand that held the tail seemed on fire, but yet he clung for dear life.

The red-skins sent showers of arrows after him as they ran, and several stuck in the haunches of the mustang, urging him on the faster, and one buried itself in Joe's arm.

Still he did not let go, and as he bounded along in great leaps, he yelled:

"Yell away, you red devils! but here we go and no one to head us off!"

Maddened with fright and pain, the mustang ran on, yet still could not shake off the weight behind him.

And the speed at which I went soon dropped the fastest warriors far behind, greatly to the delight of Joe.

At length the mustang overtook the herd and dashed into their midst, and Joe had just strength enough to grasp the mane of a small pony, as he came alongside, and drag rather than throw himself upon his back.

The sigh of relief he gave was like an escape of steam from an engine; and limp and worn out he sat upon the animal, as it ran along in the rear of the herd.

But soon he regained his breath, and as the drove struck the prairie, yelled himself hoarse to keep them going.

And go they did at a long, sweeping gallop, which put them several miles away upon the prairie before the warriors reached the end of the canyon, and beheld him.

Looking back at them, Joe said, sympathizingly:

"It's a pity they don't know English so that they can come, for I know they is that mad me as me as they for 'em."

Whether Joe was sincere in his pity or not I cannot say; but that he was in earnest in pressing on there was no doubt, for he kept the herd at a pace that put many a mile behind them before night.

The direction in which he had to go, however, was away from the camp of the emigrant train, and he regretted this; but having captured another herd, he determined to carry them first to the fort, thinking that the train would remain encamped until his return.

Suffering as he was, with his hands and feet, the latter especially, alone, exhausted after all he had gone through, Joe knew he had a hard task to watch his herd.

But he let them come to a walk, and picked out the animal which he had observed was the best of the lot, and mounted him.

Coming to a stream he allowed them to halt for a rest, and he took advantage of it to bathe his wounds, for the arrow shot in his arm gave him pain also and was swelling.

But Joe was as hardy as a pine knot, and again rushed on, after an hour's rest, and allowing the herd to go at their own gait, managed to snatch a little sleep.

Two days after, tied upon his horse half lying down with a high fever upon him, he drove his ponies up to the fort, and was taken from the back of the animal nearly dead, then alive, and most tenderly cared for by Major Van Dorn, who had returned only a short while before from his search for the brave boy.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SPOILS.

It was weeks before Joe came around to be himself again, for he had a severe illness of it.

He had at first raved about his promise to Captain Reynolds, which he had been unable to keep; but Major Van Dorn told him that he

had sent a guide and escort with them, and they had arrived in safety at Sunset Settlement.

"And Maggie?" Joe had asked.

"She is Maggie, Joe?"

"Little Maggie Reynolds," he answered, referring to the little golden-haired girl that had kissed him good-by.

And then his mind would wander away in delirium, and he would make those who nursed him laugh at the tricks he imagined he was playing upon the Indians.

Yet never once did he refer to his past life, from whence he had come, to his parents, or to one act of his boyhood before his life upon the plains.

Once did Major Van Dorn hear him say in his sleep:

"I am going back to the old Kentucky home."

"Joe," he said to him, as the boy was getting better; "Joe, are you from Kentucky?"

"I never said so when I was out of my head, did I, major?" was the strange question.

"No, Joe."

"Then I'll not say so now, major," was the calm response, and the major refrained from questioning him further.

At last the boy got on his legs once more. His wounds had healed under the surgeon's care, and he said he was ready to go.

"Go where, Joe?" asked Major Van Dorn.

"Anywhere."

"Why not stay here?"

"Why?"

"Well, you have proven yourself a great Indian-fighter, Joe, and I would engage you as a scout for the fort and give you good pay."

"What would I do with the money, major?"

"Is there not some one you could give it to?"

"No."

"Well, some day there may be."

"Yes, there may be."

"I'll keep what I've got; but how much is it?"

"I allowed you the same price for the last ponies, Joe, and sent them to head quarters, where they were needed, so I have for you, or the Paymaster has, just six thousand and sixty dollars."

"Where! I'm rich!"

"Yes, quite well off, Joe. But you can accumulate more as a scout."

"No, major; I'm going west."

"Well, Joe, I was under the impression that this was west, and a long way west," said the major, with a smile.

"Not west enough for me."

"I am going to the Rocky Mountains."

"In Heaven's name! what are you going there for, Joe?"

"Trapping, hunting, and looking around," was the cool reply.

"You'll never get there."

"I guess so."

"You'll be killed."

"I guess not."

"Well, you wish to take some money with you?"

"No, I have enough."

The major looked at the strange youth in surprise.

He could not make him out, and the more he saw of him, the more of a mystery he became. He seemed to have an air of refinement about him at times, which he also seemed to endeavor to hide.

He spoke naturally one day, and in border slang the next.

Here was an opportunity for him to remain at the fort, where he had won the esteem of officers and soldiers alike, and was looked upon as a hero.

And yet he was going to leave, and though alone, friendless apparently, coolly said his destination was the Rocky Mountains.

"What shall I do with your money, Joe, if you do not return?" asked the major.

"Oh! I'll be back some day," was the confident response.

But in case of an accident—

"You mean if I get killed?"

"Yes."

"Give it to Maggie, and tell her Joe left it for her."

"Maggie Reynolds?"

"Yes."

"She is but a little child?"

"Yes, only four or five years old; but I guess she'll grow."

"No doubt of it, Joe."

"Well, I'll give it to her if you do not return."

"Now, major, don't be in too big a hurry about it, for I'll come sliding back some day."

"I'll wait three years, and if I should be ordered away from the post I will leave it with the commander who follows me, and so on."

"Better make it five years."

"So be it, Joe."

And this financial matter being settled, Joe set about his preparations for his departure.

He had the pony he had selected from his herd, and the major said that he had shown great speed, as the men had raced him several times while Joe was ill.

"You can use your Mustang as a pack-animal."

"But Joe, I've got a horse I wish you to accept as a present from me, and he shows his heels to anything on the border, so far."

"Then I have a rifle, a new patent, and a small one, I wish you to have."

"You can use your Mustang as a pack-animal, and the men say you shall go well stocked with stores, from the commissary and the sutler, so you'll want for nothing."

Joe seemed touched at the kindness shown him, and several days after mounted the splendid animal given him by Major Van Dorn, and with his Mustang well loaded and in lead, rode out of the fort to a tune from the band and a cheer from the entire garrison.

All watched him until he got some distance off, and saw him head the west.

As many predicted that he would lose his scalp before a week went by, while others confidently asserted that he would yet be back and give a good account of himself.

"He'll dismount a whole Indian tribe yet, and be back with the Mustang," said the major with a laugh, and as the youth was yet in bearing he continued:

"Now, men, three ringing farewell cheers for Joe, the Boy Pioneer!"

With a yell they were given, and Joe was seen to turn in his saddle and raise his hat in response.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FAVOR RETURNED.

WHAT became of Joe, after his departure from the fort, no one ever knew, for several years passed away before those who had known him then heard of him again.

Scotin said he had indeed gone to the Rocky Mountains, and had passed a year or more roaming through its wilds, and others reported that a youth answering to his description, had been guiding trains over the Santa Fe trails, and had won a name in Upper Mexico as a most daring Indian-fighter, and a man whom few of the desperados of the plains cared to meet.

But one night he came suddenly before several who had known him at the fort, when he brought his captured herd in, and it was in this way.

Major Van Dorn had been pushed further west with his command, for the Star of Empire would not allow the border to remain long in one locality, as the march of civilization beat the red-skins further and further toward the Land of the Setting Sun.

About his outpost Major Van Dorn had been annoyed a great deal with a gang of desperados who were road agents, horse thieves and all else that was vile, and he had offered a reward for their capture dead or alive.

One night he had gone over to a small settle-

ment, a few miles from the outpost he commanded, to witness the marriage of a young trapper to his sister's daughter; and as there was just then a number of his troopers off on a raid, he had been accompanied only by one of his officers and two cavalrymen.

The trapper was a handsome young man, but there was that in his face which neither the girl's father nor the major liked; but the maiden had fallen in love with his good looks, and plainly told her father that he did not like her lover because he wanted her to marry the old fort sutler, who was rich.

The settler gave his consent, however, to the marriage, and the day had been set, or rather the night, for the ceremony.

Promptly at sunset the young groom arrived, accompanied by several wild-looking comrades, who he said had come down from the hills to see him "spiced," as he termed it.

The major saw these friends, and liked their looks less than he did the groom's, and, as more of them dropped in, until there were nearly a dozen present, he determined to be on his guard, well knowing that was a locality for characters of a most dangerous kind.

One of the guests attracted the attention of the major in particular, and he was about to walk over to where he stood and ask him where they had met before, when, as though divining his purpose, the young man left the cabin abruptly.

"Did you see that man, Stewart?" asked the major of his brother officer.

"Yes, major, and a dashing looking fellow he was, with an eye like an eagle," was the reply.

The one to whom they referred was six feet in height, superbly formed, and had a mass of brown curls hanging down his back.

His face was full of daring, resolute, and his eyes were black, lustrous, and in repose and, while a slight mustache was just shading his lips.

He was dressed in a full suit of buckskin, fringed and beaded, and even in the settler's cabin wore a black sombrero, the broad brim turned up in front.

Around his waist was a belt made of a panther-skin, and in it were a pair of revolvers and a long bow-knife.

"I have met him somewhere before, Stewart."

"So it seems to me, major," and the two officers tried to recall where and when the young man had crossed their paths in the past.

At length the bride came in, upon the arm of her father, and her lover and his party entered from outside the cabin, where they had been joking and frolicking with each other in a somewhat rude manner.

It was evident that they had all been drinking, and the lover, whose name was last under the border appellation given him of Bowie Bob, said in an insulting tone, as his eyes fell upon the major:

"This hasn't no military wedding, and I wants them blue coats and brass buttons to git."

His words cheered at this; but the settler, Seth Kenton, stepped forward and said:

"Bob, these gentlemen are my friends, and their being on this border prevents our homes being burned and our families massacred, and I invited them here to see Mollie married."

"Waal, I say so, old man," was the rude reply.

"Pardon me, Mr. Kenton, but I do not wish to be a stumbling block in the way of your daughter's marriage, so I will retire, and Captain Stewart will accompany me," said Major Van Dorn quietly.

The old settler evidently feared his intended son-in-law, and knew not what to say; but Mollie Kenton spoke up and said:

"For shame, Bob, to insult my father's friends."

"I'll do more than that, gal, of they don't travel quick."

"Come, git out of this and lively too, or I'll make it lively for yer," cried the major.

but she'll shoot of the ever finds out he are what he be, but what is yer lookin' fer?"

"I must've dropped my flask o' speerit, as I come'd from whar I left my critter,"

"I'll go an' git it, Joe," volunteered one, only too anxious to get the opportunity to drink half of it, and fill it up with water.

"Waal, my critter are dead best, so I left 'em in ther pine canyon."

"Ef it hain't in my saddle pocket, Tom, I guesses I hev lost it."

Tom started off rapidly in search of the treasured "speerit," and hardly had he gotten out of sight before Joe said:

"Maybe I hev a leetle drop in ther old jug, Jim, so let's see."

Jim followed him into the cabin, to suddenly find his throat in an iron grasp, and to see a revolver shoved into his face.

"Git down on yer knees, Jim, fer I intends ter lie yer."

"Don't kill me, Joe," whined the wretch, as the held on his throat was released.

"I don't want ter sile my hands with yer, but I don't intend ter keep yer from doin' no more devilry."

With that, Joe gagged the outlaw, and then shoved him, all securely bound as he was, under one of the beds that occupied the four corners of the cabin.

Going to the door, he saw Tom coming up the hill with the flask in his hand.

A look at him was sufficient to see that he had been drinking heavily.

"Did yer take any, Tom?"

"No, Joe, fer yer see it are full."

"Yes, it are full o' water, an' yer see it are full o' rum," and Joe grabbed the man in a grasp which, had he been sober, he could not have shaken off.

With a dexterity that was remarkable, he bound and gagged him also, and he too was rolled under the bed to keep his pard company.

Joe then uncovered his supper, and just as its steam came to eat it, in stepped Bowtie Bob into the cabin.

Seeing who it was he confronted, Bowtie Bob hastily drew a revolver and covered him, a weapon he had taken from the soldier he had killed.

Joe was evidently taken by surprise, for he had not expected that one of the escaped outlaws would be armed.

But not a muscle quivered as the bandit captain cried:

"Ha! you are here, traitor Joe, and I've got the dead drop on you."

"Yes, Bowtie Bob, I are here, an' I are sorry ter see yer is sish a durned fool ter think I'd come alone."

"Yer has ther dead drop on me, I t'ow; but ther is some shind yer, ther covers yer ugly carlin' fer all it are worth."

The outlaw lowered his weapon and turned quickly to look behind him.

That was all Joe wanted, for in an instant he turned the tables, and he covered Bowtie Bob with his weapon, while he said coolly:

"Drop that weepin, Bob!"

The outlaw obeyed.

"Now, I guesses you is tired sufficient ter want ter lie down on yer face."

"Down yer goes!"

With a curse the outlaw obeyed, and to bind and gag him was but the work of a minute, and he too was hustled out of sight.

Soon after there came the sound of hoofs without, and a voice cried:

"Ho, Tom! Ho, Jim! are you abed?"

"No, come in!" gruffly answered Joe.

The bolt was removed from the door, which swung open and a man stepped in with the remark:

"Boys, there has been the devil to pay down in the settlements, fer—"

"Ther devil's ter pay up heer in the mountains, Juab," said Joe, stepping from behind the door and dealing the man a blow that sent him reeling to the ground.

But, before he could follow up his advantage and bind him, two more of the outlaws entered,

and seeing him, at a glance took in the situation.

One was armed with a knife, and the other sitting a chair rushed upon Joe.

"Back, pards, fer I'd a heap rather yer'd be hung then hev ter kill yer," he shouted.

"We'll take ther chances, yer cussed traitor," cried one.

But they were the last words he ever uttered, as he fell dead, shot through the heart.

But before Joe could fire a second shot the man he had been trying to bind, seized his arm, and instantly a desperate struggle began for the mastery, the other outlaw rushing to his aid.

Hearing the fracas Bowtie Bob and his two bound and gagged companions rolled out from under the bed and made frantic efforts to speak and free themselves, so that the cabin was turned into a pandemonium for a few moments.

But Joe had the strength of a giant, and was as wiry as a cat, and rose to his feet with his two foes clinging to him, and striving all the might to prevent him from using his weapons.

With a Herculean effort he shook one off, and at once came the flash and crack of his revolver, and while one man fell dead, the other sunk out lustily:

"Don't shoot me, Joe."

"I won't, pard, fer it is better ther yer be hung; but yer'll excuse me ef I ties yer."

And this time he did, after which he turned to Bowtie Bob and the two others who had rolled out in a vain endeavor to join in the fight, and said:

"Bein' as yer rolled out, jist roll back ag'in."

They obeyed with an alacrity that pleased Joe greatly, and he said:

"Thar is four more due an' they'll be along after day, ef ther cagers hain't tuk 'em."

And before daybreak, one by one the four dropped into the trap and were made prisoners, after which Joe loaded the stolen horse in the corral with his captives and the two dead bodies, and set out on his return to the fort, where he arrived in safety.

"Joe, you shall not leave this fort, fer I will make you chief of scouts," said the delighted major at beholding him and his prisoners.

But in the morning Joe had gone, and none knew when, or whither.

CHAPTER XXI.

CALIFORNIA JOE.

In the same mysterious way in which he had before disappeared for several years, Joe again was lost sight of, after his departure from the outpost, the night of his capture of Bowtie Bob and his gang.

There were stories told of a white man living among the Indians, and some of the soldiers at this down as Joe.

Old trappers were wont to spin tales about a Hermit who lived in the Rocky Mountains, and the description of him tallied so well with what Joe was that many believed that it must be he.

Again, reports were circulated along the frontier of the doings of a man who went by the euphonious title of "California Joe."

It was said that he had guided one of the first parties of miners, into what is now the Golden State, and had shown them localities where gold was to be found in a way that proved that he must have been there before, though he would never tell any of his comrades whether such was the case or not.

It was stated also that this Gold Guide had been named California Joe, and that he had few equals in strength, was a most desperate man in a fight, and could throw a bullet in the exact spot he meant it to go.

Those who told camp-fire yarns about the mysterious man said he bore innumerable scars upon his body, legs and arms, but that his face was very handsome and unmarred.

One of the scouts who had been at the fort, and afterward the outpost when Joe was at them, was seized with the "gold fever," and made his way to California in company with several others.

Hearing of a mining camp in the mountains, where "dust" was panning out well, they sought its vicinity, and arrived just in time to witness a very exciting scene.

It seems that a man had been shot in his "flad" the day before, and his brother, a mere boy, knowing who his murderer was, had avenged his death.

The murderer happened to be the leader of a desperate lot, and they at once swore to avenge their chief, and marched in force to the cabin of his slayer.

He had heard of their coming, and stood boldly at his door, his pistols in hand.

"We've come to hang ye, youngster, an' yer mou' as well drop them weepin," said one.

"I will defend my life, so I warn you off," was the firm reply.

Come, boys, let's run on him, fer 'twon't do ter chert an' quarrel out o' ther fun o' hangin' him by shootin' him."

This advice was about to be followed, when a man suddenly stepped between the youth and his foes.

"Waal!" said the leader, savagely.

"Waal!" echoed the man.

"What does yer mean?"

"I means bis ef yer means ter hurt that boy," was the cool reply.

"Waal, we intends ter hang him."

"I guesses not."

"Yer does?"

"I does fer carlin'."

"Does yer mean ter ag'in' us?"

"I means ther boy is not ter be hurted, Tom Jones."

"Yer pard killt his brother, an' ther boy should back in equal fight, an' now yer says hang him, an' I says no."

"Waal, we'll do it, ef we hes ter kill yer ter git ter him," was the stern response.

"I guess not."

With these words the man whipped out two revolvers in the twinkling of an eye, and covered the crowd.

Some one fired, who no one knew, and that set the ball going, and in six seconds a score of shots were fired, and several men lay dead in their tracks, and the man and the youth he defended stood in the doorway of the cabin unharmed, while their assailants had fallen back before an aim that never failed.

Such was the scene that the scout and his party witnessed as they entered the mining camp, and he said:

"Who are that blarney on legs, pard?"

"Ther pilgrim what made that cold meet just now?" inquired the one addressed.

"Yes."

"They was durned fools ter push him ter it."

"But who are be?"

"Ther squarrest man in this hear camp."

"Ther man who guided ther boys ter find ther durn best, an' don't car' a durn fer diggin' it himself."

"But what are his name?"

"Waal, yer bes ter ax me suthin' more canier, pard stranger."

"Don't be hev no name?"

"Yes, but he don't give it away; but we calls him here in ther diggin' California Joe."

"Kelbue yer hev heard o' him, stranger pard?"

"Yes, I has heard o' him, an' knows him," and the scout who had turned miser went up and renewed his acquaintance with Joe, who greeted him most cordially, and added:

"I is glad ter see yer ag'in, an' ther boys will give yer a blow-out ter-night, an' it are a pity them fellers was sich durned fools fer they'll miss a good time," and those he referred to as the ones who would "miss a good time" were the men he had killed only a few minutes before in defending his young pard.

CHAPTER XXII.

JOE FACES OLD FRIENDS.

FROM the time of Joe receiving the prefix of "California" to his name, he began to be known from the Missouri to the Pacific.

At times he was a trapper on the streams of the border, and again a scout and Indian trader with the advance guard of the army.

Then he was heard of in the mines, and again haunted the settlements for a while with apparently no aim in life.

At length he departed from his favorite haunts one day, and several weeks after he rode up to the door of a comfortable cabin in one of the most delightful of the border settlements.

It was Sunday afternoon, and before the door sat the settler, a fine-looking man with hair tinged with gray, while near him was his wife, a handsome woman of forty, with a sad face.

Several children were playing near the door, and altogether the scene was a homelike one.

"Dismount, stranger, and stop with us, for night is coming on soon!" cheerily called out the settler, as California Joe drew rein a short distance off.

"That are what I hev come fer, Pard Reynolds," was the quiet response of Joe, as he dismounted and walked toward the cabin.

The settler saw before him a tall, handsome man, with hoarded face and long, curling black hair.

He was clad in buckskin hunting-shirt, and leggings stuck in the tops of high boots, while he wore a black sombrero turned up in front.

"You know me, then, stranger?" said Mr. Reynolds.

"I does, or most rather did, pard; but that were long ago."

"And yet, strange to say, I cannot recall you, my friend; but you are welcome, and this is my wife, who will give you greeting, too."

"I know that, pard, for she are as squar' as you is, and that are shoutin' Gospel; but what are little Maggie?"

Instantly a shadow fell over the faces of the settler and his wife at this question, and the former said sadly:

"She is gone, alas!"

"Dead?" asked California Joe, in a whisper.

"No, and yes, for we know not what has become of her, for one day, as was her wont, she went out hunting with her little rifle, and since then we have never seen her."

"That is strange about her?"

"Yes, but she could swim well."

"Were there Indians about?"

"Yes, Indian signs were seen about that time, and we have heard that the Cheyenne had some captive children among their tribes."

"Waal, it may be so, an' if it are, I'll find out."

"I guesses I won't stop ter-night, Pard Reynolds, but go on, for I wants ter find little Maggie."

"But, my friend, you are you that takes such a kind interest in our poor lost little girl!" asked Mrs. Reynolds, laying her hand upon Joe's arm and looking up into his honest face with eyes filled with tears.

"I are Joe."

"Our Joe?"

"Yes, I are Joe; California Joe they calls me now."

Words cannot describe the mingled amazement and joy of the poor parents at again meeting the one who, as a boy long years before, had saved them and the train from massacre.

"And you are that famous man, California Joe, of whom we have heard so much?" said Mr. Reynolds.

"Yes, I are California Joe, and I hee come nothin' round here ter see yer all an' little Maggie, an' I fitched her a little present ter wear 'round her putty neck. It are dust I dug myself out of 'er mine."

He drew out a necklace, as he spoke, of nug-

gets of solid gold which he had made into a necklace.

"Now yer keep it fer her, fer I'll be back with her afore long," and all entreaties to remain longer California Joe refused, but started at once upon the duty he set himself to perform.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CHEYENNES' RANSOM.

In an Indian village—Cheyennes—for one long year had languished poor little Maggie Reynolds.

A child of twelve, at the time of her capture, she had been made the slave of the squaw of the head chief, Feather Face, and but for her plucky spirit and hope some day of rescue the girl would have died under the life of drugger and abuse.

One day she beheld a pale-face ride into the village.

At that time there was a pitched up peace between the Cheyennes and the whites, but Maggie had not seen any of the latter bold enough to come to the Indian camp.

She eyed the stranger curiously, as he came directly to the tepee of Feather Face, accompanied by several warriors.

"My red brother knows me," said the white man.

"Yes, the Feather Face has seen the pale-face brava," was the reply.

"The hatchet is buried now; but the Feather Face would like to kill me."

The Indian bowed a ready assent.

"He has here a pale-face pappoose."

"Will he sell her to me?"

"The Feather Face will sell her for the ears of the white warrior," was the fiendish reply.

"Good!" was the smiling reply.

"Let him take his scalping-knife and cut off my ears, and then give me the pappoose."

"If the Feather Face lies, then the warriors will be ready to come upon him and burn his village."

"The white warrior has spoken."

"The Feather Face does not speak with a crooked tongue."

"The Feather Face is a natural liar," was the retort, and the stranger stepped up to the chief and bared his head by removing his sombrero, while he added:

"But I warn the Cheyenne not to break faith with me."

Poor Maggie heard and saw all, and sat crouching in the tepees, not daring to utter a word.

But, as she saw the cruel chief take his scalping-knife and seize the ear of the man to claim his ransom for her, she cried:

"No, no, let me stay here, for I am happy here; I do not wish to go home!"

"That are a screamin' lie, Maggie," said California Joe, for he it was, and turning again to the chief, he continued:

"Injun, do yer carvin'."

With a satisfied grunt Feather Face took the left ear in his fingers, and skillfully sliced the outer rim off clean.

California Joe did not wince, but said coolly, while Maggie gave a cry of terror:

"Now, 'olther one, Injun."

The other ear was then cut in like manner, and Joe made a low bow, with the remark:

"Thankee, Injun."

"Some day I hopes ter do as much fer you."

"Come, Maggie."

He took the weeping girl, and placing her upon his horse, sprung into his saddle and rode out of the Indian camp, leaving the chief laughing with fiendish delight over the ransom he had received for the captive girl.

As a two weeks after his departure from the Reynolds home, he returned one night, and Maggie accompanied him.

"Go and knock at their door, Maggie, while I stake their critters out," he said.

The young girl obeyed, and greeted was the joy of her parents when she appeared before them.

But in vain was it that they looked for California Joe, though he staked the horse, he had given her out upon the prairie, he had mottled his own animal once more and mysteriously disappeared.

CHAPTER XXIV.

JOE'S FATE.

KIND reader, it is only necessary to say that California Joe continued his wanderings about the border, doing a winning greater fame as a plainsman and Indian-fighter, until the promise he made Feather Face, to "do as much for him," was faithfully kept, and more so, for he took that chief's scalp instead of his ears in a fight he had with him one day, after guiding a party of soldiers to his village, to punish him for slaving about with "the hatchet," when it was supposed to be buried.

When the civil war broke out, California Joe went with the Union Army as one of a band of Border Sharpshooters.

That his death had not yet failed him in army service, is proven from the fact that a war-correspondent of *Harper's Weekly* sent a report of his having "picked off" a Confederate sharpshooter at the distance of fifteen hundred yards, when even artillery had failed to dislodge him.

After the war, in which he won the name of a long-range dead-shot, California Joe returned to the border, and one day came near losing his life, as he was on his way to make a visit to the Reynolds cabin, where he had not been since the night he had carried Maggie back to her parents.

He was riding along the river bank, when suddenly he beheld a canoe and an occupant, and turned just as a rifle was leveled at him.

He spoke just in time to save his life. But as Joe related the story of that meeting with Maggie Reynolds—for she it was—to Captain Jack Crawford, the "Post-Scout of the Black Hills," and he has told it in rhyme, I will give my readers a few of the verses, in their own poetic words:

Beckle a laughing, dancing brook,
As weary with a long day's scout,
I spied him in the wood,
A pretty valley stretched beyond,
The mountain towered above,
Whether the willow bark I heard
The cooling of a dove.

T was one grand panorama;
The brook was plainly seen,
Like a long thread of silver
In a cloth of lovely green,
The laughter of the waters,
The cooling of the dove,
Was like some painted picture
Some well-told tale of love.

While drinking in the grandeur,
And resting in my saddle,
I heard a gentle ripple
Like the dipping of a paddle.
I turned toward the eddy
As strange light met my view:
A maiden, with her rife,
In a little bark canoe.

She stood up in the center,
The rifle to her side,
I thought (just for a second)
By time had come to die.
I dotted my hat and told her
(If it was all the same)
My heart was spoken by sunshine,
For I was not her game."

She dropped the deadly weapon,
And leaped from the canoe.
Said she: "I beg your pardon,
I thought you were a Sioux;
Your long hair and your buckskins
Led me toward like and rough;
My heart was spoken by sunshine,
Or I killed you, sure enough."

"Perhaps it had been better
You dropped me then," said I;
"For surely such a danger
Would bear me to the sky."
She blushed and dropped her eyelids;
Her cheeks were crimsoned red,
One half-dry glance she gave me,
And then, when down her head.

* Jack W. Crawford, known as "Captain Jack the Post Scout," a famous border ranger, the companion of California Joe and Buffalo Bill in many a wild scene of frontier life.

—THE AUTHOR.

That blushing young hunters being Maggie Reynolds, and reading it need not be said that the romance of her life and that of California Joe ended in the reality of matrimony.

In his book, "My Life on the Plains," General Oster thus speaks of California Joe: "In concentrating the cavalry which had hitherto been operating in small bodies, it was found that each detachment brought with it the scouts who had been serving with them. When I joined the command I found quite a number of these scouts attached to various portions of the cavalry, but each serving separately. For the purpose of organization it was deemed best to unite them in a separate detachment under command of one of their own number. Being unacquainted with the merits or demerits of any of them, the selection of a chief had to be made somewhat at random.

"There was one among their number whose appearance would have attracted the notice of any casual observer. He was a man about forty years of age, perhaps older, over six feet in height, and possessing a well-proportioned frame. His head was covered with a luxuriant crop of long, almost black hair, strongly inclined to curl, and so long as to fall carelessly over his shoulders. His face, at least so much of it as was not concealed by the long, waving brown beard and mustache, was of a stolid, unassuming and pleasant to look upon. His eye was undoubtedly handsome, black and lustrous, with an expression of kindness and mildness combined. On his head was generally to be seen, whether awake or asleep, a huge sombrero, or black slouch hat, & a soldier's crosscut, with its large circular cape, a pair of trousers with the legs tucked in the top of his long boots, usually constituted the make-up of the man whom I selected as chief scout. He was known by the euphonious title of 'California Joe'; no other name seemed ever to have been given him, and no other name appeared to be necessary.

"This was the man whom, upon a short acquaintance, I decided to appoint as chief of the scouts."

"As the four detachments already referred to were to move as soon as it was dark, it was desirable that the scouts should be at once organized and assigned. So, sending for California Joe, I informed him of his promotion and what was expected of him and his men. After this official portion of the interview had been completed, it seemed proper to Joe's mind that a more intimate acquaintance between us should be cultivated, as we had never met before. His first interrogatory, addressed to me in furtherance of this idea, was frankly put as follows:

"See hyar, ginerl, in order that we hev no misanderstainin', I'd jist like ter ax ya a few questions. First, are ya an ambulance man or a horse man?"

"Professing ignorance of his meaning, I requested him to explain."

"I mean," said he, "do yer b'lieve in catchin' Injuns in ambulances or on horseback?"

"Still assuming ignorance, I replied, 'Well, Joe, I believe in catching Indians wherever we can find them, whether they are in ambulances or on horseback.'"

"That ain't what I'm drivin' at," he responded. "S'pose you're after Injuns and really want to have 'tussle with 'em, would yer after 'em on horseback or would yer climb inter a ambulance and be hauled after 'em? They's ther pint I'm a-headin' fer."

"I answered that I would prefer the method on horseback, provided I really desired to catch the Indians; but if I wished them to catch me, I would adopt the ambulance system of attack."

"You're hit the nail squar' on the head," said he. "I've bin with 'em on the plains whar they started out after Injuns on wheels just as at they war goin' to a town funeral in their States, an' they rode out on horseback, an' we catchin' Injuns on a six-mule team would

catchin' a pack of thesiv'n hi-o-ter, jist as much. Why, ther sort y' work is only fun for the Injuns; they don't want anything better. Yer ort to're seed how they pepped it to us, and we a-doin' o' nuthin' all the time. Sum yer 'm was afraid the mules war goin' to stampede an' the sort o' with ther heels and all our forage an' grub, but they was impossible; fer besides the big loads uv corn an' bacon an' baggage the wagons had in 'em, thar war from eight to a dozen infantry 'men piled into 'em besides. Yer ort to hear heard the quarter-master's charge uv the train tryin' to drive the infantry men out uv the wagons and git them into ther fight. I spect he was a Irishman, by his talk, fer he said to 'em: "'Git out uv thim wagons; get out uv thim wagons; yer'll hev me thried fer distandance uv y'orders for marchin' in thim in a wagon whin I've orders fer but a!'"

California Joe was killed, as was his friend Wild Bill, by the hand of an assassin.

He was seated in front of his cabin at Red Cloud, Dakota, on Dec. 31st 1876, when the devil's loved weapons, who soon be fired at him from an ambush and shot him through the heart.

Who that unseen assassin was no one ever knew, and the secret will doubtless remain unknown, unless the still, small voice of conscience should drive the murderer to confess the crime some day, for most truly it is said that "murder will out."

THE END.

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